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Egypt: Potential for Student Unrest

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An Intelligence Assessment

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*NESA 82-10527
October 1982*

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Egypt: Potential for Student Unrest

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An Intelligence Assessment

This assessment was prepared by [redacted]
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Potential for Student Unrest

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Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 16 August 1982
was used in this report.*

Egypt's traditionally restive university campuses have been calm since the assassination of Anwar Sadat. The government's tough moves against religious extremists and the implementation of stringent controls regulating campus life have had a sobering effect on students.

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As the trauma of the postassassination period subsides, however, political and religious opposition groups are increasing pressure on the government for solutions to persistent economic and social problems. In this environment students are likely to adopt a more active role and renew criticism of government policies.

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Developments elsewhere in the Middle East this year have increased the possibility of student unrest when schools reopen in October. Israel's invasion of Lebanon and the siege of Beirut aroused deep anti-Israel and anti-US emotions in Egypt and throughout the area. Egyptian Government officials expressed relief to US Embassy personnel that the Israeli action took place as the school year was ending.

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President Mubarak's disciplined mentality suggests that he will be less tolerant of youthful protest than was Sadat. He is likely to revise Sadat's carrot-and-stick approach toward students, relying more heavily on the stick to ensure that unrest does not reach previous levels. He also will attempt to ensure that any increase in student activism does not spread to younger military personnel.

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A variety of social factors and educational policies have contributed to the government's success at managing campus politics thus far. Measures such as the expansion of educational opportunity and guaranteed employment for university graduates have been effective in the past but have added significantly to the country's staggering economic and social burden.

In the longer term, prospects for regime-threatening campus upheavals will increase as the rising expectations of Egypt's educated youth go unmet. Rapid population growth and the government's unwillingness to implement the politically unpopular economic reforms necessary to sustain economic growth are at the heart of the problem.

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Egypt: Potential for Student Unrest

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Students represent the most highly concentrated politically aware segment of Egyptian society. Since the 1920s, campus activists have played an important role in shaping the political attitudes of entire student generations, and through disruptive and highly publicized activities such as strikes and demonstrations, they on occasion have affected the political life of society as a whole.

The Shifting Balance of Power on the Campuses

The Arab military defeat by Israel in 1967 ushered in an era of political fragmentation in Egypt, which was accelerated by Nasir's death and Sadat's desire to liberalize the political process. Two related phenomena also emerged during this period—a renewal of Islamic fundamentalist expression throughout Egyptian society and the reemergence of militant student activism after more than a decade of quiescence.

Campus turmoil was widespread throughout the 1970s. The universities became the battleground as the growing power of students influenced by the fundamentalist revival came up against the well-established leftist student groups spawned during the Nasir era. According to US Embassy reporting, the Muslim Brotherhood and other Arab states including Saudi Arabia and Libya began providing money to religious student elements to strengthen them against the left. Communist groups and outside powers such as Iraq worked to maintain the predominance of the left.

Sadat's desire to suppress the left enhanced the status of the religious right. It was not until he used police repression to cripple the student left in the wake of the food riots of January 1977, however, that Islamic groups or "societies" were able to gain control of the student unions previously dominated by the left. US officials in Egypt believe the cause of these Islamic societies was furthered by the adverse grass-roots reaction to the corruption in many of the officially sanctioned student unions. Moreover, moderate students had come to see the religious groups as allies in

the struggle against the student left. Islamic society members also involved themselves in activities that tangibly benefited the wider student community, providing such things as books, study guides, meals, and clothing at far lower than university rates.

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In our view the change on the campuses in the political balance from left to right also represents an inadvertent result of the educational changes instituted under Nasir. The Free Officers' egalitarian policies extended educational opportunity to segments of the population that had been excluded from the elitist educational system that existed before 1952. As students from lower social and economic backgrounds have entered the educational system, the student population has become less politically sophisticated. As a consequence, today's students are more easily mobilized by the familiar symbols of Islam than by nontraditional ideologies.

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The Islamic Societies

The alienation of the religious right mirrored the public grievances of the student left: dissatisfaction with the peace process, distress over new economic objectives, disgust at growing Egyptian ties with the forces of Western "imperialism," and despair over prospects for the future. Despite a near identity of interests, cooperation between the two groups never developed. Instead the secularist solutions proposed by the leftists were rejected in favor of those based on Islamic values.

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The campus fundamentalist movement grew rapidly, especially among students away from home for the first time and confronted by the unfamiliar values of the urban environment. The fundamentalists apparently missed few opportunities to proselytize among these newcomers. According to Embassy and media reporting, the fundamentalists provided the students with needed services and generally acted as a surrogate family, offering them a sense of community and

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Leftist students demonstrate outside the Egyptian Parliament building to protest the government's economic policy.



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security similar to that of their traditional environment. Society members also recruited students at mosque services, approaching those who appeared to be most absorbed in their devotions. [redacted]

Eventually this emboldened minority moved to impose its values on the directionless student majority. According to US Embassy reporting, the Islamic societies intervened in all aspects of student life, especially in matters that concerned separation of the sexes. Society members attempted to review the religious content of teachers' lectures and openly criticized those who did not follow a religious line. The fundamentalists insisted that classes be interrupted for daily prayers and disrupted meetings, concerts, and films that they believed violated Islamic standards. Students who attended coeducational functions were often physically abused. On some campuses moderate and leftist students reacted strongly against the activities of the fundamentalists, and there were frequent clashes between them. In most instances, however, students were too intimidated and disorganized to counter the religious right effectively. [redacted]

[redacted] in some areas society members carried their activities into the surrounding communities. For example, villages near Asyut were said to have regularly received teaching

"messengers"—students from the Islamic societies—to instruct the villagers on religious and political topics. The uneducated populace did not question the teachings because they were given in the name of Islam. [redacted]

From Campus Activism to National Politics

Ironically, Egypt's peace treaty with Israel in 1979 elicited little response from students. The Islamic fundamentalists, beyond calling for a halt to the peace process, did not organize any significant opposition. They limited themselves to small demonstrations protesting Israeli activities or Sadat policies like the offer of asylum to the Shah of Iran. [redacted]

The treaty appeared to be less an issue for students than were questions about the role of Islam in society. The amendment of Egypt's law on personal status in 1979 outraged fundamentalists. The amendments struck at the heart of the conservative social order by enhancing women's rights, especially in matters of divorce, remarriage, and child custody. [redacted]

[redacted] fundamentalists and members of the Egyptian intelligentsia also expressed bitterness that the amendments had been promulgated when Parliament was not in session. Extremist students organized

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*Students prepare for exams at
Cairo University, January 1971.*



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campus strikes and carried their protest beyond the university gates into the streets. In July 1979, one week after warning students against using religion for political purposes, Sadat ordered the abolition of the fundamentalist-dominated student unions. In a further effort to bring the student right to heel, Sadat called for the creation of a religious youth apparatus under the control of the ruling National Democratic Party. [REDACTED]

Just as the left continued to exercise influence after Sadat moved against it in 1977, so the Islamic right continued to exert itself in the face of government attack. In November 1979 the Islamic societies were still able to stage a mass prayer service in Cairo, where leaflets were distributed calling for the establishment of a Muslim government in Egypt. [REDACTED]

Sadat apparently wanted to avoid direct confrontation with the students, probably because he feared such action would provide grist for his political opposition. Instead, the government began to compete with the Islamic societies by offering students increased economic support and providing summer jobs and outside activities. [REDACTED]

Despite these measures, the religious groups managed to dominate the campuses until sectarian violence during the summer of 1981 led Sadat to launch a massive crackdown on both religious and political opponents. He abandoned his nonconfrontational approach with students and made clear he was waging all-out war on the preaching and practices of the fundamentalists. He announced the implementation of stricter measures to combat extremism on the campuses, including the prohibition of Islamic dress. These regulations went into effect with the beginning of the 1981-82 school year, just days after Sadat's death. [REDACTED]

The Post-Sadat Atmosphere

Since Sadat's assassination Egypt's university campuses have been calm. According to US Embassy reporting, student troublemakers have been expelled from the universities, and many of the ringleaders are still in jail. The Islamic societies, banned in September 1981, made a sober reappearance earlier this year. Once again some students are adopting Islamic dress and engaging in religious activities, but government and university controls have ensured that there has been no return to the fanaticism of a year ago. Mubarak's secularist outlook appears to be welcomed

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by the majority of students. We believe, however, that the radical fringe continues its activities underground.

The Mubarak regime has continued most of the programs to gain student approval begun by Sadat and also has implemented more direct measures to divert students from subversive activities. More stringent grading procedures and frequent examinations are among the most effective means for controlling student activism. Military education was reintroduced in many secondary schools and technical institutes during the past school year as part of an expanding effort to reach young minds earlier and impose discipline. The government has also announced plans to revise military conscription procedures, recruiting more secondary school graduates before they enter the universities.

New regulations regarding student union elections have returned a more moderate and secularist student leadership. the regulations were so strictly interpreted at the American University of Cairo, a private university, that several student candidates were banned from running for office because they were the children of prominent leftist politicians. At Ayn Shams University and the University of Cairo the student government of each faculty was placed under the control of the dean, making him the de facto head of the student government with control over all student-sponsored activities.

In addition to formal control mechanisms that keep student unrest in check, we believe that other "indigenous" factors undermine student activism. The primacy of the family in Egyptian society, for example, has tended to mute generational conflict that is often a major factor in student unrest in other countries. Despite the social and economic dislocation that has led many young Egyptians into extremist movements, most still submit to parental authority far beyond the ages of their counterparts in many other societies.

Beyond the Campuses: Student Involvement in Islamic Terrorist Organizations

Beyond the campus-based Islamic societies, numerous extremist movements have arisen, including the *Takfir wal-Hijra* and *al-Jihad al-Jadid*, best known for their involvement in the events surrounding the assassination of Anwar Sadat. The Islamic terrorist groups are similar ideologically to the Muslim Brotherhood, from whose dissident ranks they originally sprang. They differ, however, in their willingness to engage in violent confrontation with the government and in their total commitment to personal martyrdom for the sake of true Islam.

Involvement of Egyptian youth, particularly students, in these extremist organizations has been sizable. Of the 24 defendants in the Sadat assassination trial, eight were university students, one was a high school student, and two others were college instructors. Moreover, of the 300 Jihad members charged with attempting to overthrow the regime after Sadat's death, approximately half were students, and many others were recent graduates and teachers.

Although Jihad successfully recruited radical students as members, available reporting suggests that there is little connection between the extremist groups and the campus-based Islamic societies or other fundamentalist movements. Membership in a particular extremist organization tends to be localized—most members of Takfir have come from upper Egypt because of the Asyut origins of the movement's founder.

Despite the heavy representation of educated Egyptian youth in these extremist organizations, they are not student movements. Rather, they represent an outlet for radical students who are unable to express themselves through campus organizations. The fundamentalist movements, insofar as they survive underground, will continue to attract the radical fringe among educated youth.

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Table 1
Egyptian Religious Fundamentalist Groups

Group	Approximate Date of Formation	Estimated Membership	Ideology	Comments
Muslim Brotherhood	1928	500,000	Moderate	Violent during late 1940s and through the mid-1960s; changed policy with Sadat regime; now emphasizes evolution to Islamic state; little evidence of connections to extremists.
Jama'ia Shariya (Legal Society)	Early 1970s	Unknown	Moderate	Split from Muslim Brotherhood over issues of mysticism; probably more influential with Islamic extremists than with Brotherhood.
Shabab Sayyidna Muhammad (Youth of Our Lord Muhammad)	Unknown	Unknown	Moderate	Ideology similar to Legal Society, but smaller membership.
Takfir wal-Hijra (Repentance and Holy Flight)	1971	4,000-5,000	Extremist	Implicated in Sadat's assassination; more than 800 arrested in September crackdown; funds apparently come from remittances from members working abroad and robberies.
Al-Jihad (Holy Struggle)	Mid-1970s	More than 1,000	Extremist	Members also involved in Sadat assassination; appear to be the group most directly involved in violence against Coptic Christians.
Al-Jihad al-Jadid (The New Holy Struggle)	1980	Probably exceeds 1,500	Extremist	Umbrella name used by members of Takfir, older al-Jihad, and other groups that allegedly took part in the assassination. Group also believed responsible for postassassination attacks in Asyut, when 80 police officers and men were killed and another 120 wounded. More than 1,200 arrested in ensuing roundup.
Shabab Muhammad (Youth of Muhammad)	Unknown	Small	Extremist	Ideological orientation similar to Takfir.
Jama'at ahl-Bayt (People of the House)	1970s	Unknown	Extremist	Shia group banned in 1979 for advocating Khomeini-type revolution; may have connections with Iran's religious leaders; no recent reports of activities.
Tahrir (Islamic Liberation Party)	Early 1970s	Unknown	Extremist	Ideology similar to Takfir.
Jama'at Quwwat al-Quran (Forces of the Koran)	Early 1970s	Unknown	Extremist	No record of violence and no recently reported activity.
New Islam	Early-to-mid-1970s	Unknown	Extremist	Calls for Iranian-style Islamic revolution; members primarily students in scientific disciplines or workers and engineers in factories; no recent reports of activity and no record of violence.
Hizb Allah (God's Party)	1981-82	Believed to be small	Extremist	More than 60 arrested in postassassination sweeps. Not considered to be internal security threat by government.
Tanzim al-Qutbiyun (Supporters of Sayyid Qutb)	1981-82	Small	Extremist	More than 90 recently arrested. Not considered threat to government at this time. Named after Muslim Brotherhood leader and author who was executed for seditious activity during Nasir's presidency.
Al-Tala'ia al-Islamiya (The Islamic Vanguard)	1982	Small	Extremist	Group uncovered in April 1982.
Group for the Promotion of Virtue	Late 1970s?	Small	Extremist	Violent toward those who violate Koran and traditions of Muhammad. Engages in pamphleteering.

Profile of the Student Extremists

A prominent Egyptian sociologist has conducted extensive research on the membership of the extremist societies of the religious right, studying groups active before and after Sadat's assassination. From this research a profile of the Islamic militant has emerged. The members range in age from 17 to 26, with a high proportion of students. The others tend to be teachers and recent graduates holding professional, usually governmental, positions. The majority come from rural or smalltown backgrounds. Nearly all were recent arrivals in the big cities where they had come to enroll in universities after completing secondary school. Even those born in urban centers had lived in smaller communities during their early and middle adolescence. Most of the militants came from middle and lower middle class backgrounds. The fathers of two-thirds of them were government employees, mostly middle grade civil servants, with educations ranging from secondary school to some college. Generally the militants came from cohesive families where there had been no divorce, separation, or death of either parent. None was an only child.

Virtually all of the student militants were enrolled in the science faculties—engineering, medicine, agricultural science, pharmacy, and technical military science. Only one of the test group was in the humanities. Egypt's educational structure is designed to permit entry of only the brightest students to the

fields of engineering and medicine. Because graduates in scientific fields are in demand both in Egypt and abroad and are less dependent upon the government for employment, they can better afford involvement in antiestablishment activities than can the multitude of social science graduates who must depend upon the government for jobs.

The militants, thus, come from upwardly mobile backgrounds and are high in motivation and achievement. They represent the ideal young Egyptian. Ironically, the social and economic profile of today's militants is similar to that of the leftist student activists of the 1960s and the Free Officers of the 1950s. Leftists, however, tended to come from urban backgrounds and the Free Officers from families in the process of urbanization but with strong ties to their traditional rural environments.

Many of the young fanatics in Egypt are products of social and economic disturbances and dislocation. The educated are disillusioned with their station in life and confused because many traditional obligations and values of Egyptian society were weakened during the Sadat era. The attraction to Islam frequently has been the result of a psychological need to identify with something permanent and widely accepted.

In our view, the most serious consequence of student discontent would be its spread to the military, the ultimate arbiter in Egyptian politics. This almost happened during the Sadat regime in 1972. Military units in the Suez Canal zone were believed to be unreliable after they began openly protesting the "no war, no peace" situation, the same complaint as that on the university campuses. Sadat unwittingly had created a link between students and the junior officer corps by expanding the Army enlistment program in

early 1971 to prevent unemployment among the growing number of university graduates. One scholar claims that by 1972 as many as 70,000 university graduates were serving in the military, and the enlistment rate for university graduates was as high as 80 percent.

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Table 2
Egypt: Educational Expansion, 1951-80

University	Year Founded	1951-52	1971-72	1974-75	1975-76	1976-77	1977-78	1978-79	1979-80
Totals		38,194	199,074	320,100	421,584	453,650	476,536	485,185	509,249
Cairo	1908	19,460	56,597	74,746	86,751	88,612	91,851	92,135	93,234
Alexandria	1942	6,457	45,441	59,078	65,122	69,690	71,424	72,570	72,739
Ayn Shams	1950	9,099	51,848	69,148	76,680	84,426	86,324	83,790	91,783
Asyut	1957		15,368	27,936	35,696	29,054	30,455	32,171	33,627
Tanta	1972			17,040	26,685	19,748	21,832	22,366	23,364
Mansura	1972			20,047	25,553	29,500	31,398	33,585	35,203
Zagazig	1974			11,827	15,898	26,039	35,355	41,562	46,877
Helwan	1975				46,604	35,211	35,040	32,908	31,332
Minya	1976					10,283	10,286	10,330	10,688
Minufiya	1976					10,712	11,801	12,018	12,146
Suez Canal	1976					7,312	7,192	7,520	7,364
Al-Azhar	972	3,178	29,820	40,278	42,595	43,063	43,578	44,230	50,892

Sources: Data for 1951-52 and 1971-72 are from "Some Aspects of the Quantitative Development of Education in Egypt Since 1952" by Ian Bronsveld in *Arab Society 1978-79: Reflections and Realities*. Data for 1974-80 are from *Statistical Yearbook: The Arab Republic of Egypt, 1952-80*.

We believe that following the 1973 war junior officers were less susceptible to youthful discontent because of the esteem in which members of the armed forces were held. Moreover, most conscripted students had been demobilized within a year after the war, and economic problems were of less consequence to officers, who enjoyed numerous benefits at that time. We believe that growing discontent with their economic situation, however, may again have encouraged the spread of discontent within the military. []

Mitigating Student Unrest

The government guarantees a place in the higher education system to virtually every secondary school graduate. The university population has expanded from about 40,000 in the mid-1950s to more than a half million today. This sharp expansion of the educational system is an important factor limiting student

unrest. The entry of masses of poorly prepared students into the universities has inhibited the organization and development of a politically aware student cadre. []

Another significant factor in limiting student unrest has been the government policy of building universities in the provinces. Originally this decision was based on the need to relieve pressure on the overcrowded central universities, to make higher education available to more young Egyptians, and to stem the flow of talented youth from the countryside.

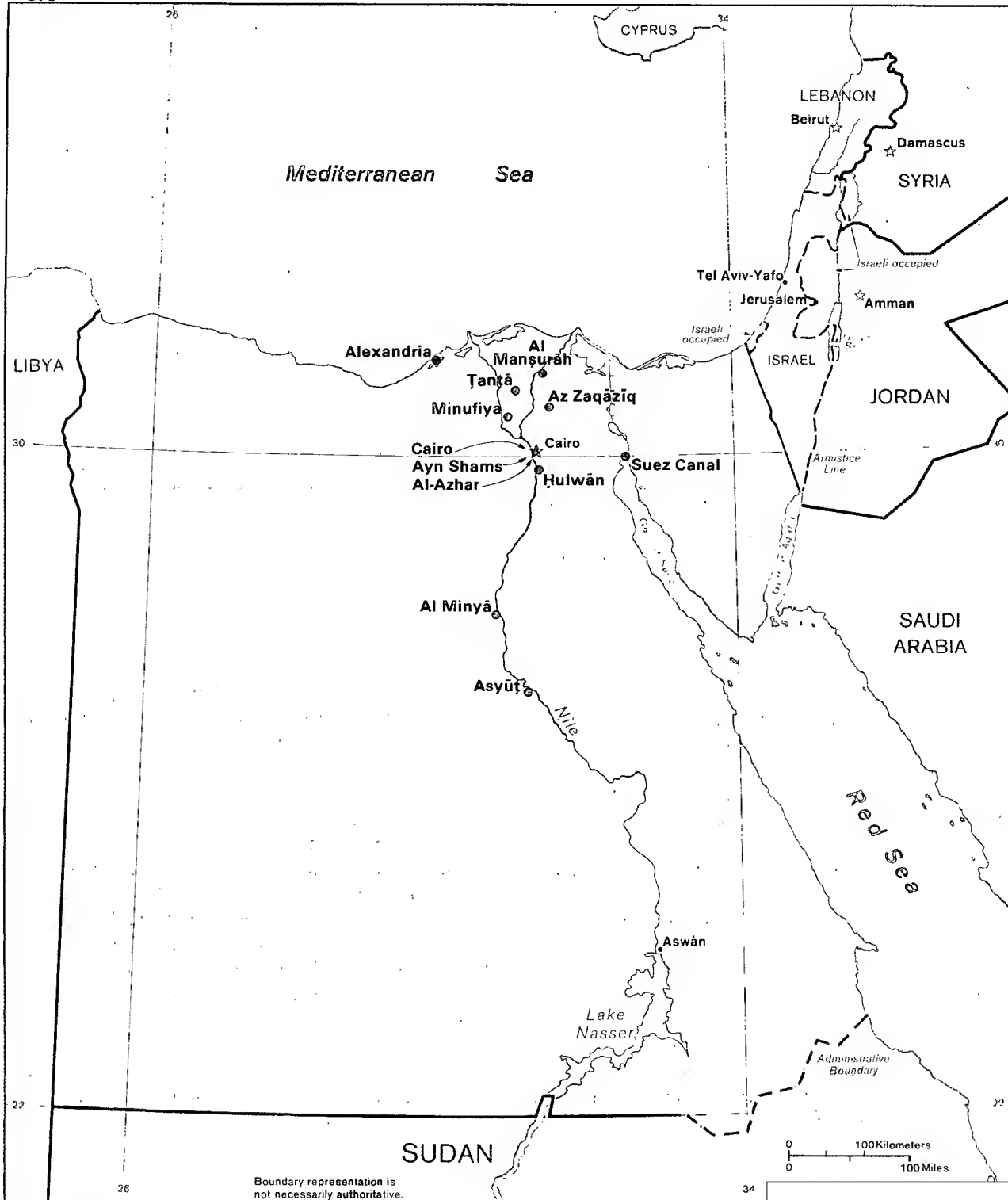
Inadvertently the regime discovered that student unrest is minimal in the provincial environment. []

Every Egyptian university graduate is guaranteed a job in the state apparatus, although many must wait up to two years for jobs that are neither economically

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Egypt: State Universities



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Arab students seize the Syrian Embassy temporarily to protest Syrian intervention in Lebanon, 3 June 1976.



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nor professionally rewarding. The government has managed to maintain this policy in part because of the demand for trained personnel in other Middle Eastern countries. Sadat liberalized the emigration laws in the early 1970s to permit larger numbers of professionals to leave the country. The Ministry of Manpower and Training recently estimated that 3 million Egyptians, including professionals and laborers, are employed outside Egypt. This overseas option serves as an economic backstop for young Egyptians as well as for their families, who benefit from the remittances, and provides a vital political safety valve for the economic discontent of youth. [REDACTED]

Outlook

The extent of student activism in the months ahead will depend largely on President Mubarak's ability to deal successfully with Egypt's mounting economic and social problems, as well as upon his willingness to impose discipline on the competing centers of power that will challenge him on national and domestic issues. We believe that any relaxation in the political environment that results in serious political skirmishing between the President and opposition groups will open the way for greater student participation in national politics. Despite factors that have helped to keep student agitation within bounds, students are capable of mounting strikes and demonstrations that

could prove politically embarrassing and perhaps influence the policymaking process in some areas. [REDACTED]

The Israeli invasion of Lebanon could provide a focal point for student agitation when schools reopen in October. That conflict, following the Golan annexation and Israel's controversial policies in the occupied West Bank, will further crystallize student opposition to the normalization of relations with Israel. Events in Lebanon also are likely to affect US-Egyptian relations. According to US Embassy reporting, many students believe that the Israeli invasion was launched with US connivance and that the United States sanctioned the use of American-made weapons against civilians in Lebanon. The subsequent US peace initiative has helped defuse such anti-American sentiment, but it could grow rapidly again over some other regional development. [REDACTED]

The religious orientation of student activism is likely to predominate for some time. Born of the psychological frustration of the post-1967 period, the Islamic resurgence has been translated into a broad-based social movement. Youth, particularly students, who

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have come to political awareness during this period have been deeply affected by the popular return to religion. The search for cultural authenticity also has contributed to the attraction of Islam over "imported" ideologies.

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Radical students probably will not develop effective campus-based opposition movements in the near term because of stringent government controls. Instead, they will continue to direct their antiregime energies into underground extremist organizations. Although the capacity for violence by these groups will be a continuing problem for the regime, they do not appear to have sufficient popular support to overthrow the established order.

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The demand for trained Egyptian personnel abroad and the easing of emigration laws have enabled the government to continue its policies of virtually unrestricted admission to higher education by secondary school graduates and of guaranteed employment to university graduates. Any effort to revoke or seriously modify these policies would threaten the concept of "equity" introduced during the Nasir years. If they are not revised, however, there will be a sharp increase in politically destabilizing economic and social pressures, especially in view of Egypt's rapidly expanding population. By the year 2000, Egypt will face the awesome problem of meeting the demands of a population that includes about 30 million youths, some 12 million more than today.²

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